

A Comparative Analysis of Two Arabic Translations of *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract—Ernest Hemingway’s novel *The Old Man and the Sea* portrays the nature of human struggle through the events of a fisherman attempting to catch a giant fish while at sea. Many of the challenges that the protagonist experiences cause him to rely on his faith in God, and as a result, the text is full of religious utterances and symbols. This study was based on the comparison and analysis of the two translations, including examples from the source text and the translation into Arabic by Muneer Ba’lbaki, a Lebanese Muslim, and Gabrielle Wahbeh, an Egyptian Christian. Results showed that reading these two different translations of the same novel reveals many dissimilarities regarding religious terms. The study found that the reception environment and religious background of the translators affected the translational choices to meet the expectations of the target readership.

Index Terms—translation, cultural references, religious utterances, translation strategies, translation challenges

I. INTRODUCTION

Translators face enormous obstacles when interpreting writings involving multiple religions, cultures, and target audiences. These difficulties become most apparent when the cultural and theological circumstances of the original text differ from those of the target language. As a result, translators must traverse not only linguistic variations but also cultural nuances to produce a translation that resonates with the intended audience while retaining the original meaning. Certainly, translation is more than just relaying equivalent meanings; it entails altering the linguistic and cultural features of the source text to conform to the norms and values of the destination language and culture. Some translators choose to maintain the cultural and linguistic elements of the source language to achieve accuracy, whereas others prioritize the target language conventions, potentially moving or altering the cultural background to better meet the expectations of their target audience.

Published in 1952, *The Old Man and the Sea* was Hemingway’s last major work and earned him both the Nobel and Pulitzer Prizes for its literary impact. The story narrates the struggle of a skilled but unlucky fisherman attempting to catch a giant marlin at sea. Throughout the story, several events unfold to symbolize human struggle through the challenges and suffering that the fisherman faces while also including a variety of Christian references and allusions that emphasize the difficulties of the protagonist throughout the story. The moral of the story can be summarized by the protagonist, Santiago, when he says, “A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (Hemingway, 1952, p. 38). However, another major theme in the novel is facing destiny. The old man proves his strength by fighting to catch the giant marlin, but the old man ultimately loses his reward (the meat of the fish) to the sharks despite his valiant struggle.

Symbolically, Santiago embodies human perseverance and struggle, while the vast sea serves as a metaphor for life’s unpredictable and challenging nature. Moreover, Hemingway may have intended to embody aspects of Jesus Christ in Santiago’s character by drawing parallels between his struggle and Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. Additionally, the novel references numerous biblical verses and texts, with religious utterances and terms woven throughout the story. These elements of the story are translated into Arabic in different ways by the two translators, Gabrielle Wahbeh (2007), an Egyptian Christian writer, and Muneer Al-Ba’lbaki (2002), a Lebanese Muslim writer, and reflect their different approaches to religious content. Religious content in literature presents distinct challenges for translators, who must navigate cultural expectations and tailor their strategies to align with the norms of the target audience.

This paper conducts a comparative study of selected examples from the source and target texts, addressing the following research questions:

1. Do translators’ religious backgrounds affect their approach to translation?
2. Do translators make any shifts in their translation to meet the expectations of the reception environment?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tackling the religious expressions in *The Old Man and the Sea* leads to a discussion of Ernest Hemingway’s religion and how it affected his work. According to Rama Rao (2007), there is a combination of subtle and clear religious undertones in Hemingway’s writing, reflecting aspects of his faith and upbringing. Hemingway draws on religious imagery and motifs in his storytelling, including symbols associated with his Christian belief. He glorifies *The Old Man and the Sea* through distinctly Christian references and spiritual symbolism, and it has more biblical flavor than any of his other works. However, faith-related phrases often pose challenges in translation. Larson (1998) asserts that “terms which deal with the religious aspects of a culture are usually the most difficult, both in analysis of the source vocabulary

and in finding the best receptor language equivalence. The reason that these words are intangible and many of the practices are so automatic that the speakers of the language are not as conscious of the various aspects of meaning involved” (p. 180). Therefore, the translator will face much difficulty in translating expressions that are not used or practiced in the target language.

Malmkjær et al. (2015) highlighted several challenges translators encounter when working with texts that include references to religious scriptures. Nida (1969) stated that translators intentionally change many aspects in their translations in order to fit their own political, social, or religious predilections. Both scholars argue that such translations often reveal significant cultural differences.

Schaffner and Tymoczko (2003) affirm that translation is often influenced by the translator’s personal beliefs, which in turn shape lexical choices in the target language. Nabokov believes that “the person who desires to turn a literary masterpiece into another language has only one duty to perform, and that is to reproduce with absolute exactitude the whole text and nothing but the text” (Venuti, 2000, p. 121). Torop (2002) asserts that culture and translation represent separate domains with unique traits that do not completely overlap. He argues that translation allows for the movement of cultural ideas and values across languages, helping to foster cross-cultural communication and understanding.

Giaber (2013) demonstrates how the translator’s Arab-Islamic cultural background is reflected in his translations by incorporating Arabic expressions that reflect diverse dimensions of Arab-Islamic tradition. Giaber (2013) interprets this reflection as evidence of a process of domestication, whether conscious or unconscious, employed by the translator. Domestication, as defined by Venuti (1995), is “an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home” (p. 20).

III. METHODOLOGY

For this case study, *The Old Man and the Sea* has been selected in addition to two of its Arabic translations. This research employs a comparative analysis to explore the differences that arise when translating the same text from two distinct cultural and religious perspectives. The goal of the analysis is to reveal the specific translation strategies adopted in each version and explore how audience-related factors influence the translators’ choices.

This research compares the two translated versions of each religious utterance and explains the differences between them. In light of the cultural and religious backgrounds of Gabrielle Wahbeh and Muneer Ba’lbaki, the research will also focus on the religious terms found in the source text and how each translator transfers the religious utterances in a way that matches the expectations of the readers. This research also draws attention to the complexity of the translation and highlights the motives behind each translator’s method of translation.

IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The following section presents an analysis of both Arabic translations of the novel with a discussion about their translation, showing the differences between them:

TABLE I
COMPARISON OF THE TRANSLATION OF THE PHRASE “GOD HELP HIM TAKE IT”

Ba’lbaki	Translator	Wahbeh
يا الهي ساعدها على التهامها	Arabic	اللهم اعنهما لتأخذها
<i>ya alhi saeadaha ealaa ailtihamiha</i>	Transliteration	<i>allahuma aeanaaha ltakhudhaha</i>
Oh god help her eat it.	English	God help her to take it.

Readers can notice the difference in the translation of this utterance by Wahbeh and Ba’lbaki. In the source text, the author writes in English, “God help him to take it” (Hemingway, 1952, p. 44), as a supplication to God for help in getting the fish (“him”) to take the bait so that the old man can catch it. Wahbeh translates this phrase using a form typical of Islamic supplication, which conforms to religious patterns of prayer. His use of اللهم/allahuma (“Oh God”) reflects a stronger plea and emphasizes dependence on God. Moreover, the word “help” is translated as اعنه/aienuh (“help him”), echoing the classical dua’a: لَا تُعِنِّ عَلَيَّ وَلَا تُعِزِّ عَلَيَّ / rbb aenni wala tuein elay (“Lord, help me and do not help against me.”) (Sunan at-Tirmidhi, n.d.). This well-known phrase reinforces the religious undertone and familiarity for target readers. Wahbeh’s rendering successfully invokes the intended meaning by embedding expressions rooted in Islamic scripture.

Conversely, Ba’lbaki translated the word “God” into يا الهي/ya alhi (“Oh, my God”), which is not the best way of praying to God in Islam or Christianity. For example, the expression يا الهي / ya ilahi (“Oh, my God”) is commonly used in Arabic to express surprise or emotional emphasis rather than as a direct supplication. Because of this broader usage, the phrase may be interpreted in different ways by readers and does not necessarily convey a strong sense of dependence on God. Furthermore, the word “help” is rendered differently by the two translators. Ba’lbaki translates it as ساعدها / sa’adaha (“help her”), which conveys a more literal meaning and does not fully reflect the author’s core message, which is a plea for divine help so the fish would take the bait.

TABLE 2
COMPARISON OF THE TRANSLATION OF THE PHRASE “CHRIST KNOWS HE CAN’T HAVE GONE”

Ba’lbaki	Translator	Wahbeh
المسيح يعلم ان من المستحيل ان تذهب	Arabic	الله وحده يعلم
<i>almasih yuelam an min almustahil an tadhhab</i>	Transliteration	<i>allah wahdah yuelam</i>
Christ knows that it is impossible to go.	English	Only God knows.

The source text employs the name “Christ” as an emphatic expression used to reinforce the meaning of the statement. In the sentence “Christ knows he can’t have gone,” the character stresses the impossibility that the giant marlin has disappeared by invoking the name of Christ. In the two Arabic translations, however, this expression is rendered differently, revealing distinct religious and cultural perspectives. For example, Wahbeh replaces “Christ” with الله / Allah (“God”) rather than المسيح / al-Masih (“Jesus”). This choice appears to align the expression with forms of religious reference that are more familiar within the Islamic cultural context of Arabic readers. However, Ba’lbaki translates “Christ” literally into Arabic as المسيح / *almasih* (“Jesus”). Using المسيح / *almasih* (“Jesus”) would reflect the religious perspective that match the expectations of the Christian target audience in Lebanon. As a result, he translated “Christ” literally to allow the intended readers to better engage with the translated text.

In Christian belief, God is worshipped as the creator of the universe, and المسيح / *almasih* (“Jesus”) is regarded as the divine messenger who gave his life for the redemption of humanity. Throughout his translation, Wahbeh avoids literal translation and instead adapts the text to the cultural context of the target language. Ba’lbaki, on the other hand, follows a more literal approach to meet the expectations of the target readership context. This translation shows how religion and target readers influence translator’s decisions.

TABLE 3
COMPARISON OF THE TRANSLATION OF THE PHRASE “HE COMMENCED TO SAY HIS PRAYERS”

Ba’lbaki	Translator	Wahbeh
وشرع يتلو صلواته	Arabic	وشرع يردد صلواته
<i>washare yatlu salawatih</i>	Transliteration	<i>washare yuradid salawatih</i>
And he began to recite his prayers.	English	And he began to repeat his prayers.

In the original text, the protagonist begins to say his prayers as he attempts to catch the fish. The word “says” is translated into يردد / *yuradad* (“he repeats”) by Wahbeh and يتلو / *yatlu* (“he recites”) by Ba’lbaki, both of which produce different interpretations. Ba’lbaki translated the word “say” into يتلو / *yatlu* (“he recites”), a verb commonly used in Islamic contexts to describe the recitation of the Qur’an, highlighting its sacred nature. In his translation, Ba’lbaki appears to be drawing from Qur’anic language, as the word يتلو / *yatlu* (“he recites”) and similar forms are frequently found in Qur’anic verses. For example: *أَوَلَمْ يَكْفِهِمْ أَنَّا أَنزَلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ يُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَرْحْمَةً* / *awalam yakfihim 'anna 'anzalna ealayk alkitab yutlaa ealayhim 'inn fi dhalik larahmatan* (“Is it not sufficient for them that We have sent down to you the Book which is recited to them? Indeed, in that is mercy.”) (Qur’an 29:51). On the other hand, Wahbeh translates the same word in a literal way, and it would be better if he used a clearer term like يردد / *yuradad* (“he repeats”) to convey the meaning correctly, as it is used for any type of speech and does not have any relation to religious terms. Ba’lbaki’s choice may resonate more with Muslim readers, who commonly associate the word يتلو / *yatlu* (“he recites”) with Qur’anic recitation and devotional acts. Wahbeh has translated the word “say” in its literal meaning, which would be acceptable for non-Muslims.

TABLE 4
COMPARISON OF THE TRANSLATION OF HAIL MARY PRAYERS

Ba’lbaki	Translator	Wahbeh
مباركة انت بين . الرب معك . "السلام عليك يا مريم ، يا ممثلة النعمة ايها القديسة مريم ، يا . النساء ، ومباركة هي ثمرة بطنك يسوع المسيح ثم " ! ام الله ، صلي من اجلنا نحن الخاطئين الان ، وفي ساعة موتنا امين "ايها العذراء المباركة ، صلي من اجل موت هذه السمكة "اضاف	Arabic	Omitted
<i>alsalam ealayk ya mirimu, ya mumtaliat alniemati". alrabu maeka. mubarakat ant bayn alnisa', wamubarakatan hi thamarat batnik yasue almasihi. ayataha alqidiysat maryam, ya am allah, saliy min ajilina nahn alkhatiyn alan, wafi saeat mawtina amyn!" thuma adaf "ayataha aleadhra' almubarakat, saliy min ajil mawt hadhih alsamkati"</i>	Transliteration	
“Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus Christ. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen!” Then he added, “Blessed Virgin, pray for the death of this fish.” (Hemingway, 1952, p. 66)	English	

The words in these prayers are taken from the Bible, particularly Luke 1:28 (New International Version), and there is a strong meaning for these prayers in Christianity. The old man recited these prayers when he was about to catch the fish, when he was alone without the boy, and when he finally caught the marlin. Santiago vows that he will recite “10 Our Fathers and 10 Hail Marys.” Wahbeh does not translate this part from the source text; instead, it is omitted. In general, Wahbeh’s omission of these Christian prayers may reflect sensitivity to the cultural and religious background of the target readers. Replacing them with Islamic phrases, for instance, could have shifted the religious tone of the original and altered its intended meaning. On the other hand, Ba’lbaki keeps these prayers in his translation because they represent an important element of the narrative and reflect the old man’s religious devotion. He transferred these prayers from the source text into Arabic in a way that would relate easily to the majority Christian Lebanese community, who have a good knowledge of these prayers.

TABLE 5
COMPARISON OF THE TRANSLATION OF THE OLD MAN’S PROMISE TO VISIT THE VIRGIN OF COBRE

Ba’lbaki	Translator	Wahbeh
إني لأقسم لأحجن إلى مزار العذراء	Arabic	Omitted
<i>'iiniy li'uqsim li'ahjan 'iilaa mazar aleadhra'</i>	Transliteration	
I swear to make a pilgrimage to the shrine of the Virgin (Hemingway, 1952, p. 75).	English	

This part in the original text indicates that the protagonist, Santiago, vows to undertake a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Cobre, a well-known sacred shrine in Cuba, if he succeeds in catching the fish (Hemingway, 1952). Wahbeh chooses to omit this reference in his translation, possibly because the concept of pilgrimage differs between Islamic and Christian traditions. If Wahbeh had substituted the Virgin of Cobre with Mecca, the Muslim pilgrimage site, it might have seemed inconsistent with Santiago’s character and could have confused the intended audience. Alternatively, rendering the Virgin of Cobre as العذراء كوبر *aleadhra' kubar* (“Virgin Cobre”) would likely require additional clarification, which might disrupt the flow of the narrative. Ba’lbaki chose to convey the meaning of the source text in his translation. He translated “Virgin of Cobre” into مزار العذراء *mazar aleadhra'* (“shrine of the Virgin”), showing that it is a place of worship to which Christians make pilgrimages. Christian readers are likely to recognize and understand Ba’lbaki’s translation because they are familiar with the Virgin of Cobre and regard it as a sacred site; therefore, this translation aligns with their religious and cultural expectations.

TABLE 6
COMPARISON OF THE PHRASE “THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS”

Ba’lbaki	Translator	Wahbeh
قلب يسوع الاقدس	Arabic	للقب المقدس
<i>qalb alyasue alaqdis</i>	Transliteration	<i>lilqalb almuqadas</i>
Sacred Heart of Jesus	English	For the Sacred Heart

Both translators translate the utterance with terms that almost have the same meaning; Ba’lbaki translates it literally as قلب يسوع الاقدس *qalb alyasue alaqdis* (“Sacred Heart of Jesus”), a term usually associated with the Catholic Church, unlike the القلب المقدس *lilqalb almuqadas* (“For the Sacred Heart”), which is associated with other denominational Christian churches as a symbol of love and humanity. Here, Ba’lbaki oriented his translation to the Lebanese Christian community, translating it in a manner that makes sense to Lebanon’s largely Catholic Christian community. On the other hand, Wahbeh, who is Christian and likely familiar with Christian traditions, translates this phrase in a way that reflects his own religious background and perspective.

TABLE 7
COMPARISON OF THE PHRASE “TEN OUR FATHERS AND TEN HAIL MARYS”

Ba’lbaki	Translator	Wahbeh
والسلام عليك يا مريم "ابانا" لكني خليك بأن اتلو	Arabic	ولكنني ابتهل كثيرا الى الله وإلى جميع القديسين والقديسات
<i>lakiniy khaliq bi'ana atlu "abana" walsalam ealayk ya maryam</i>	Transliteration	<i>walakinani aibtahal kathiran alaa allah wa'iilaa jamie alqidiysin walqidiysat</i>
But I am worthy to recite "Our Father" and "Hail Mary"	English	But I pray a lot to God and to all the saints, men and women.

In the source text, the protagonist says, “I will say ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys” indicating his intentions to seek divine help in catching the fish. Notably, this statement does not mention the word “God.” However, Wahbeh adds the word الله *Allah* (“God”) before the prayer segment, likely to reflect the Islamic belief that prayers should be directed explicitly to God, who is the ultimate source of help. Including this reference may have been intended to preserve the spiritual meaning for a Muslim audience. On the other hand, Ba’lbaki chooses to translate this Christian prayer literally. In the Catholic denomination of Christianity, it is common to pray to Mary and God (“Father”) in hopes of receiving

guidance or help with their desires, so Ba’lbaki’s translation can be perceived in a way that Christians would understand and accept.

Ba’lbaki, as a Muslim, was more faithful to the source text, possibly because of his lack of knowledge about Christian utterances. To avoid misrepresenting the prayers and utterances, Ba’lbaki translated them literally. On the contrary, as a Christian translator familiar with Christian theology, Wahbeh had more flexibility in modifying the text to resonate with the target audience, often choosing to omit or adjust religious expressions accordingly. As a result, he was able to omit and change certain parts of the text to make them acceptable to Muslims.

TABLE 8
COMPARISON OF THE PHRASE “THE VIRGIN OF COBRE”

Ba’lbaki	Translator	Wahbeh
عذراء كوبر	Arabic	للعذراء
<i>aleadhra' kubar</i>	Transliteration	<i>leladhra'</i>
Virgin Cobre	English	for the Virgin

In this example, Ba’lbaki adopts a borrowing strategy when translating the religious reference “the Virgin of Cobre,” which suggests that a direct lexical equivalent may not exist in Arabic. Borrowing is frequently used when translators encounter culture-specific concepts that cannot be easily rendered in the target language (Larson, 1998). By retaining the original term, Ba’lbaki preserves the cultural specificity of the reference. In contrast, Wahbeh omits the word “Cobre,” possibly because the term may appear unfamiliar or culturally distant for the target readership. In such cases, translators may bridge cultural gaps through explanatory additions such as footnotes or brief clarifications, which can help readers understand culturally embedded references (Nida & Taber, 1969).

From the examples the researcher has provided, it becomes clear that Wahbeh consistently adapts religious expressions and related phrases to reflect the cultural mindset and expectations of his target readers. Although Wahbeh is a Christian from Egypt, he adjusts his translation choices in line with the cultural and religious norms prevalent in the Arab world, where Islam is the dominant faith. As a result, he left out some Biblical references and religious book titles, opting instead for alternatives like skipping certain segments or replacing them with widely recognized Islamic supplications. For instance, he rendered the word “Christ” as الله/Allah (“God”) rather than المسيح/almasih (“the Messiah” or “Jesus”). He felt at ease modifying the text because of his familiarity with Christian theology, allowing him to omit and adapt parts of the original. On the other hand, it seems that Ba’lbaki, a Muslim, was more inclined to remain faithful to the source, perhaps due to limited familiarity with Christian references. To avoid altering the intended meaning of the prayers and religious terms, Ba’lbaki translated them literally.

V. STUDY FINDINGS

Each translator adopted different translation strategies that reflect sensitivity to the religious and cultural context of the intended audience, especially in the rendering of religious expressions. In some examples, Ba’lbaki relied on literal translation so closely that the target text occasionally lost coherence. This can be seen in several instances throughout his version of the novel. In other cases, however, he drew on Qur’anic-style diction, as in his rendering of “says his prayers” as وشرع يتلو صلواته / *washare yatlu salawatih* (“And he began to recite his prayers”). This choice appears to reflect his Muslim background, although such shifts are not frequent in his translation overall, particularly since he was translating for a Christian readership.

On the other hand, Wahbeh appears to have been more influenced by the expectations of a predominantly Muslim readership. He omitted some parts while translating the religious Christian utterances from the source text in order to make the translated version fit the target readers’ norms and conventions. Many of these Christian expressions may be unfamiliar to an Egyptian Muslim context. For example, he frequently renders “Christ” as الله/Allah (“God”) instead of المسيح/almasih (“the Messiah” or “Jesus”). He also substitutes some Christian expressions with Muslim supplicatory language, such as translating “God help him” as اللهم أعنها / *allahuma aenaha* (“Oh God, help her”). In this way, Wahbeh’s replacement of Christian expressions with Islamic wording appears more effective for his intended audience than a strictly literal translation would have been.

Both translators adopted different strategies tailored to the cultural and religious expectations of their respective audiences. Because the translators were working for audiences whose religious backgrounds differed from their own, the translated versions show limited influence from the translators’ personal beliefs. The translation changes seem to be the consequence of conscious decisions to conform to each target culture’s norms. Furthermore, every translator changed their selections specifically to fit the religious and cultural norms of their intended audience.

VI. CONCLUSION

When reading Wahbeh’s translation of *The Old Man and the Sea*, it gives the impression that the text was originally written in Arabic and authored by Wahbeh himself. The language flows naturally, and the translation feels cohesive while incorporating references to Arab culture and Islamic traditions. It is not immediately apparent that this work was originally

written in English. This effect is achieved through the substitution of some expressions and the omission of others that may not resonate culturally.

Wahbeh made various adjustments throughout his translation to better connect with his intended readers, who are primarily Muslim. In adapting to this audience, he altered, skipped, or replaced certain concepts to ensure the text would feel culturally appropriate. He maintained cultural sensitivity by frequently referencing God (الله) and using recognizable Arabic expressions and prayers to enhance clarity, all while avoiding footnotes or side explanations that might break the narrative flow. These familiar religious phrases resonate with the audience and preserve the natural tone of the story without making the translator's presence obvious.

On the other hand, reading Ba'lbaki's version of the novel *The Old Man and the Sea* shows a consistent approach in that he addresses his translation to an open society in Lebanon. His Islamic religious background does not affect his translation, as he consistently uses Christian prayers and utterances throughout the novel.

This study shows that translating literary works varies between each translator and is shaped by the target audience's norms and worldview. The way a message is communicated to audiences with various cultural backgrounds is greatly influenced by translation changes, as they help convey the underlying messages of the original works in ways that resonate with the cultural and religious sensibilities of their readers.

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